

A VENDISH CHRISTENING.

A glorious July morning was shining down upon the waving flax and corn-fields of one of the most fertile Vendish districts on the left bank of the Elbe, as I drove with my friend, the clergyman of the parish, to a small village in the neighbourhood, where he was to christen the child of a well-to-do farmer.

The two fine, high-spirited horses which drew our light char-a-banc, carried us along like the wind across the plain. As far as the eye could reach, nothing but fields, orchards, and meadows; only here and there a village bosomed in oaks, or a dark pine-forest, contrasted with the light green. In some fields they had already begun to cut the corn, and on each side of the road the mowers stood whetting their scythes, and the fresh, sturdy peasant-women, who were binding up the sheaves, paused for a moment from their work to look at us as we flew past.

A long row of willows — the favourite tree of the Vends — showed that the village was near, the houses of which were buried amidst oaks, alders, and willows. It consisted of a single broad and tolerably long street, on either side of which was a row of barns and stables: behind these were the large, open yards, and in the background stood the dwelling-houses. The latter were surrounded with flower, fruit, and vegetable-gardens, and behind these again were meadows and fields, the ager publicus of the parish.

We stopped before a well-built house, where the christening was to be celebrated. The master of it, a strong, fine-looking man of about forty, with brown curly hair, and an open, cheerful countenance, came out of the door towards us, and cordially shook hands. His first words of salutation to the clergyman — “Err Pastor ” — betrayed unmistakably his Vendish origin, for that people share a peculiarity not unknown in England, by totally ignoring the aspirate. Indeed, although the Vends have lived for centuries on the bank of the Elbe, and are in many respects completely Germanised, still, if they were to find themselves at the present day in the position of the “fugitive Ephraim,” and, on arriving at the “ferry of the Elbe,” some word beginning with that fatal eighth letter of the alphabet were to be their Shibboleth of recognition, their chances of ever reaching the opposite side would be doubtful, to say the least. Many curious mistakes between the Vends and Germans occur through this omission.

Entering the large, cheerful parlour, we found only a few of the guests assembled, since, having driven fast, we arrived a considerable time before the hour fixed for the ceremony. The room was simply furnished; but order and neatness compensated for the want of better furniture. Everything was simplex munditiis. The window-seats, posts, and frames, the tables, chairs, and benches round the wall were painted red, the Vendish national colour; the cupboards and presses were carefully polished, and the walls whitewashed and clean as snow. I looked through the open door into the next room, where stood the cradle with the little child, and saw, to my astonishment, that, in spite of the bright midday sun which was beaming in at the windows, two candles

were burning on the table. This custom had its reason, as I learnt afterwards from the clergyman. The Vends believe that the so-called underground folk (the dwarfs and gnomes of popular legends) spy after newborn children, steal them, and put their own misshapen children into their place in the cradle. Those “underground people,” however, are afraid of any burning lights, and for this reason a candle or lamp is lighted immediately upon the birth of a child, and not extinguished till after the christening. After this ceremony, they have no longer any power over the child. In some villages a leaf of the Bible or the hymn-book of the church is placed under the pillow in the cradle, as a preventive against evil until baptism. Notwithstanding these precautions, lest “something might happen,” anxious parents hasten the christening as much as possible.

Gradually the dignitaries — that is to say, the godfathers (for if the child is a boy, the services of godmothers are dispensed with) — and the rest of the guests arrived. First appeared a few aged women. In all civilised countries it is the custom to offer the first salutations to the elder members of the family, but at a Vendish christening length of days alone constitutes no prior claim to recognition. Without speaking a word, these women, all dressed in black, crossed the room and went into that adjoining: there they went up to the cradle, and, one by one lifting up the white kerchief which covered the child’s face, said, with a solemn mien and voice, “God bless it! ” This benediction over, each immediately changed her previous expression of solemnity into that of joy, and going up to the parents and the guests, greeted and congratulated them affectionately. Had they forgotten to pronounce first of all this

blessing upon the child, it would, according to popular belief, have been exposed to all possible temptations. This “God bless it!” plays altogether a great part in Vendish superstition. If an old woman, or stranger, or suspicious-looking man should happen to look into the stable without first uttering this prescribed formula, a Vend sees at once in his imagination all kinds of terrible figures, witches, and wizards about to destroy his cattle.

Soon after, the godfathers entered in state. They were three stout and thriving Vendish farmers, of whom the eldest was to hold the baby during the actual irrigation. Although it had not rained for a whole week, and the field-paths were therefore not muddy, yet it seemed to me that the state of their boots neither corresponded to the smart appearance of the rest of their apparel, nor was exactly in accordance with the solemnity of the occasion. I remarked that the trio were an exception to all the other male guests, who had by no means been sparing in the use of bacon rind, the Vendish means of imparting the customary lustre to the lower extremities. This seeming neglect, however, had its peculiar purpose. If the new citizen of the world is to be in the enjoyment of a clean skin during his lifetime, his godfathers must not polish their boots on the day of the christening. Consequently, as every genuine Vend knows the meaning of such inattention to blacking, the peculiarity provokes no comment.

All having now assembled, the actual ceremony began. As soon as the clergyman had recited the prefatory prayer, the mother of the child seized a Bible, and, sitting down in a corner of the room, began to read in a low voice with great eagerness, whilst the

godfathers listened with the utmost attention to the clergyman's address, and almost inaudibly muttered after him the passages from Scripture which he happened to quote. By doing this, the mother and godfathers, according to a Vendish belief, secure to the child the capability of being a good scholar later on. The one who held the child went still further in his zeal. Pressing as close as possible to the clergyman, he stretched his head forward, and looking fixedly over his book from in front, tried to spell a few words in that position. One talent the little fellow seemed already to possess in a rare degree — that of screaming.

I fancied I saw the clergyman a little put out by this noisy conduct of our diminutive hero although he must have christened many a tuneful Slavonian before; at all events, parents and godfathers alike showed, by their happy faces, that such hearty screams were a thing to rejoice at. Happy parents! Did not this music tell them that long life and health would be the portion of their first-born? Great is the sorrow when the child is silent during the ceremony, for it is sure, they say, in that case, to die during the first year of its little life. I must, however, in justice to the parents, remark that except on these occasions they by no means encourage such over-noisy practice of the lungs, and the child is in most villages drawn thrice through the steps of a ladder to prevent its repetition.

When the ceremony was over, the clergy-man addressed his congratulations to the parents, but the godfathers rushed out of the room as if the house was on fire. I followed, and saw one of them run into the stable, and, snatching up the currycomb, pass it several times up and down the horses' backs: the second ran to the

cows, and threw before them an armful of hay; and the third seized an axe and began cleaving a piece of wood. All this had also a meaning. If the low repetition of Bible passages was to secure to the little one, mental capabilities, these different domestic labours were to ensure to him bodily strength, dexterity, and perseverance. If the child should be a girl, then the godmothers run into an adjoining room, and spin for a few moments, or scour some utensil. Whenever the baby is christened in church, it is the duty of the youngest godfather to take it in his arms, in limine primo, on returning home, and to run with it in all speed to its mother, whereby it is supposed to gain additional aptitude for work.

If children of both sexes have to be christened, parents are generally very unwilling that they should both be baptised in the same water. If the girls are baptised first, then the boys, it is said, will remain beardless: if the latter take precedence, it is to be feared that the girls when grown up will see transferred to their upper lip the hirsute ornament of the male sex.

The little banquet which followed the christening was ample, and, for a peasant, luxurious. The favourite dishes of the Vends were conspicuous — dumplings, rice, beef, and stewed prunes. The daily “black bread,” however, was not there; on this festal day it had been put aside as too common, and its place was supplied by the “paggeloitzen,” small wheaten loaves, baked in the shape of a horse-shoe. These loaves are national favourites, and are eaten in incredible quantities on festive occasions.

Should a Vendish child not prosper, it is assuredly no fault of the

godfathers, since every formal act or omission refers to its future welfare. This tender solicitude continues during the meal. All three seemed to emulate each other in heaping on the mother's plate a portion of every dish on the table, for her to taste something of all. This, I learned, was to prevent any habits of fastidiousness in the child.

Custom requires only one more act on the part of the godparents. This is, that they should come and see the child on the day when its mother goes to church, and bring it some present. The parents, on their part, have to take care that no dog or cat is kept in the house before the expiration of a year, since otherwise the life of the child is in jeopardy. It is a firm belief among the Vends, that a child and animal cannot prosper together.

The general appellation of Vends was given to those Slavonian populations which had settled in the northern part of Germany from the banks of the Elbe to the Baltic. It now applies especially to the Slavonians of Lusatia, who to this day preserve their national language and customs. Even now a Vend can be known in Germany by his marked peculiarities of physiognomy, — black hair, almond-shaped eyes, with a mixed expression of Oriental cunning and languor, strangely belying their actual character.

E. Fairfax Taylor.

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